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DEPARTMENT FOR S/GWI AND AF/E - JWIEGERT

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KWMN](#) [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [PHUM](#) [ET](#)

SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA'S NOMINATION: INTERNATIONAL WOMEN OF COURAGE AWARD
2010

REF: STATE 111471

¶1. (U) Embassy Addis Ababa would like to nominate Ms. Birtukan Midekssa Deme, Chairperson, Unity for Democracy and Justice Party, as our nominee for the 2010 Secretary's Award for International Women of Courage. The remainder of this cable is tracked to nomination detail criteria outlined in reftel.

¶2. (U) Nomination Details:

Full Legal Name of Nominee: Birtukan Midekssa Deme. (Note: Ethiopians are given a single first name. Their second and third names are their father's and paternal grandfather's first names respectively. For passport purposes, the grandfather's name "Deme" is used as the surname, but for all other purposes women go by the Amharic equivalent of "Mrs" followed by their first name, i.e. Woizero Birtukan. End Note.)

Job Title: Chairperson, Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) Party.

Date of Birth: April 27, 1974

Country of Birth: Ethiopia

Citizenship: Ethiopian

Address, Telephone, and E-mail:

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

+251-911-406-739

BIRTUKANMIDEKSSA@YAHOO.COM

(Note: Because Birtukan remains incarcerated as a political prisoner, her e-mail and telephone numbers are effectively defunct).

Passport Number: EP0374810

Confirmation of Notification: Post confirms that we discussed this nomination with the nominee prior to her nomination for the 2009 award. At that time, she did confirm her appreciation for, and concurrence with, our intention to nominate her. As Birtukan remains in near solitary confinement and is denied her constitutional right of visitation, Post cannot confirm her concurrence with this nomination for the 2010 award.

¶3. (U) Justification for Award:

Birtukan Midekssa shattered the Ethiopian political system's glass ceiling by becoming the first woman to lead a political party in the country's more than 3,000 year documented history. Despite a challenging political environment and having been the personal target of prominent persecution, Birtukan not only made history for the role of women in politics, but fundamentally altered Ethiopia's political landscape by establishing the country's first truly national political party. Threatened by the challenge that she posed to the ruling party, in late-2008, the Ethiopian government revoked her pardon (for a previous politically-motivated conviction) and is currently detaining her in near-solitary confinement for a

life sentence.

Soon after graduating with honors from law school, Birtukan Midekssa was appointed as a judge in Ethiopia's High Court in her early 20s. From her position on the bench, Birtukan personally observed the lack of judicial independence and strong-handed efforts by the Ethiopian Government (GoE) to influence the courts. When the GoE arrested former Defense Minister and ruling party founder Seeye Abraha on spurious charges for having dissented with the ruling party's position, Birtukan ordered his release -putting her clearly in the GoE's targets. Unable to change the political manipulation of the courts from within, Birtukan forewent the job security of lifetime judicial tenure to join the political opposition. Birtukan quickly rose within the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), assuming a position as Vice-Chair, and winning a seat in Parliament in the tumultuous May 2005 national elections.

After months of legal challenges to contest the election results, police detained Birtukan and over 100 senior opposition leaders in November 2005, holding her for seven weeks without charge in violation of the constitution. The GoE finally charged Birtukan and her colleagues with seven capital offenses, including Treason and Genocide, which Post and Ethiopia-watchers have declared politically motivated. With a one-year old daughter at home, Birtukan spent the next 19 months in prison. In June 2007 the Ethiopian court convicted Birtukan of five capital offenses and sentenced her to life in prison. In late July, Ethiopian elders helped secure a GoE pardon, and release, for Birtukan.

After being released, Birtukan remained committed to forming a strong opposition party. Recognizing the inherent weakness of Ethiopian political parties which are uniformly oriented toward an

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individual leader or ethnic group, Birtukan struggled successfully to ensure that the new Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) party was truly national in complexion, leadership, and support. On June 18, 2008, UDJ held its founding general assembly with participants reflecting Ethiopia's diversity. Birtukan's strong credentials, dynamic vision, and persuasive rhetoric convinced the founding members to elect her as the first woman to lead an Ethiopian political party.

In December 2008, the GoE re-arrested Birtukan, arguing that her (legally and factually accurate) statements in the autumn in which she argued that she had never asked the GoE for a pardon violated the terms of her pardon. The GoE revoked her pardon and reinstated her life sentence without judicial review or option of appeal. The GoE then placed Birtukan in solitary confinement for five months allowing only once-per-week visits by her 70-year old mother and four-year old daughter. While she has since been moved to a cell with two other women, the GoE continues to flout a court order to permit her constitutionally guaranteed visitation rights.

14. (U) U.S. Mission Priorities:

The introduction of robust democratic practices and institutions is a fundamental objective of the United States. As a strong political leader, an accomplished professional, and an individual willing to face personal adversity rather than compromise her integrity, Birtukan Midekssa is a role model for all Ethiopians, but particularly young women who tend to be excluded from Ethiopia's political environment. In recognizing Birtukan with this award, the United States would send a very strong message to the people of Ethiopia that we continue to uphold American democratic values of fair play and rule of law. Recognizing this persecuted but very brave woman with the Secretary's Award for International Women of Courage would appropriately acknowledge the respect and admiration that she holds among the Ethiopian people and signal the U.S. government's concern for her treatment.

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